The Fourth Church Pulpit

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE SECULAR CITY

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Almighty God, we pray for your blessing on the church in this place. Here may the faithful find salvation, and the careless be awakened. Here may the doubting find faith, and the anxious be encouraged. Here may the tempted find help, and the sorrowful comfort. Here may the weary find rest, and the strong be renewed. Here may the aged find consolation and the young be inspired; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Book of Common Worship
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A)

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture
Galatians 3:10-14
Acts 17:16-34

"While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols."
Acts 17:16 (NRSV)

If you were here one year ago this Sunday, you would have been sitting on a folding chair. Over your head was a forest of scaffolding, supporting planking, obscuring the ceiling. Fluorescent tubes lighted the place, large speakers were strapped to each pillar, the choir was in the north balcony with an electronic organ, and it was about as warm as it is today, only a lot more dusty.

In this year of transition we have completed the restoration of our sanctuary, and now, believe it or not, the rest of the restoration and recreation project is moving toward completion. During the next thirty to sixty days we fully expect a new church facility to come into being. Those of us who inspect the site regularly know that we have an incredible surprise in store. New spaces which will allow new ministry will appear and we aren't going to recognize them—

A new gathering space, "Anderson Hall"
A new Blair Chapel
A new Day Care Center
A new internal traffic system
New education spaces
New spaces for Older Adults and infants
And two sets of elevators and ramps to make all of it accessible

I'll be away for some time and I've been thinking a lot about who we are and what it means to be a church.

In the northeast of Turkey, between the Black and Caspian Seas, the ancient kingdom of Georgia flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It was, I am told, a kind of Christian Camelot, ruled by benevolent kings who presided over a strong economy and stable society, and who imported the best Byzantine artists and artisans to design and adorn the churches and public buildings. And then it all disappeared, destroyed by marauding tribes. Today it is a wilderness.

Barbara Brown Taylor begins a fine book with the account of traveling in that section of Turkey and hiking into a small settlement. Thinking, as I have been, about what it means to be a church, I found her account gripping:

> "We turned a bend and the outline of a ruined cathedral appeared, a huge gray stone church with a central dome that dominated the countryside. Grass grew between what was left of the roof tiles and the facade was crumbling."

Entering the ruins they encountered the shell of a once magnificent church: most of the roof was gone and the locals used one corner for a garbage dump, children played soccer in what was the nave. On the massive walls were still the fading frescoes, lambs of God and angels and medieval saints. In the dome she saw one outstretched arm of the victorious Christ who had presided over the eucharist ten centuries ago.

Taylor, an Episcopal priest and eloquent preacher, observes:

> "It is one thing to talk about the post-Christian era and quite another to walk around inside it. Christianity died in Turkey — the land that gave birth to Paul — the land of Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae, Nicea. Today, the Christian population of Turkey is less than one percent."

Taylor did what I would have done: imagined her own parish church — the wooden rafters rotted, roof gone, stained glass broken, the altar removed to a museum. And she reflects:

> "Such a thing is not impossible; that is what I learned in that ruin on the hillside ... that knowledge keeps me from taking both my ministry and the ministry of the whole church for granted. If we do not attend to God's presence in our midst and bring all our best gifts to serving that presence in the world, we may find ourselves selling tickets to a museum." [*The Preaching Life*, p. 3-5]

It is something to think about. In the broad sweep of history things change; paradigms shift, to use the currently fashionable phrase. The medieval city cathedral towered over the whole community; its bells marked the hours; its square was filled daily with the noisy urban activity of commerce, entertainment, festival, socialization. Compare that with the famous picture of Trinity Episcopal Church, at the foot of Wall Street, the richest church in America, "physically dwarfed by the tall office buildings that rise on every side." [Gaylord Noyce, *Survival and Mission for the City Church*, p.32]

Or for that matter, compare it with us. Page 159 of our own history book, *A Light In The City,* shows the same view looking north on Michigan Avenue in 1923, 1932, 1964, and 1990. In 1923 Fourth Presbyterian Church is one of the largest and most substantial buildings in the neighborhood. By 1990 it is virtually invisible. In fact, one of my favorite views is from the top of the Hancock Center looking straight down at a tiny, delicate jewel in the middle of powerful and enormous skyscrapers.

It has been suggested that the spatial relationship, the relative diminishing of the church in the modern city is, in actuality, a symbol of what is happening to religion in general, Christian faith in particular. Everyone knows that beneath the feverish concern about the decline of the mainline church is the more critical concern about the place of faith in modern life. It's not just how to keep Presbyterian and Episcopal and Methodist churches going, it's how to be faithful, how to speak of God and faith, how to live honestly and faithfully in a new world no one has ever seen before.

Harvard theologian Harvey Cox argues that while the city did not turn out to be as secular as everybody thought it was, traditional religion is more and more squeezed out, marginalized, forced to exist in the corners, the niches of culture.

Cox suggests that if the cathedral defined medieval culture, and the white-framed church with its steeple blessing the rolling hills of New England or the awesome expanse of prairie defined the life of our culture for two centuries, the structure that best represents the modern city is an airport.

> "Here all the brilliant achievements and perverse flaws that have made the modern world what it is are joined and welded and on display, ... Invisible voices announce departures to the great capitals of the globe.
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> "Science and technology are here. Numbers, the favored language, claim equal stature with words. It is flight four-thirteen, leaving at ten-twenty, from gate thirty-two on corridor three. The sky, the rain, the wind all held at bay by weatherproof windows ... sleek shining planes, ingenious devices for moving thousands of people along endless corridors.
>
> "Here at the Big Airport the whole world is literally within our reach."

"And religion? Where is God?" Cox observes dryly that Logan Airport has a niche for God: squeezed into a corner near the place for lost baggage is a tiny chapel.

> "The chapel is modern, almost chic, trying its best not to look too anachronistic in its improbable setting. There is a priest assigned to Our Lady of The Airways — unkind rumor has it that being assigned there is a kind of mild punishment imposed on a cleric who has come to the Chancery's attention once too often." [*Religion in the Secular City*, p.184-185]

O'Hare has one also. I spoke about it five years ago and was determined to go see it sometime. I haven't made it and still don't know where it is.

Cox's point is not that religion ought to play a more visible role in airports. In fact, it seems to me that there is probably more praying and invoking the Lord's name, although not always in reverence, in airports and airplanes than most places. The point is that traditional religion is inevitably squeezed out, pushed into an out-of-the-way corner by modern urban life. And that part of what is happening to us as churches decline in the city is that religion itself is marginalized. It is something to think about and that process of consideration can best begin for us with the arrival, 2,000 years ago, of our first missionary in the quintessential city of the ancient world.

Athens — the crown jewel of human civilization — had seen better days when Paul visited. Socrates had died 450 years earlier, the political center of civilization had moved west to Rome, and the greatest seaport and commercial center of the whole region was down the coast at Corinth. What Athens still excelled at was sophistication, intellectual sophistication. The whole city must have been like Hyde Park, where Nobel Prize economists walk the sidewalks and sip coffee with nuclear physicists, paleontologists and sociologists, where dialogue is incessant and intense and conversation exhausting.

Athens was famous for it. The leaders and teachers of the two predominant schools of philosophy established themselves there — the Epicureans and the Stoics. There was a university and there was a kind of civil court to determine the integrity and viability of new ideas, and there was a place, the Areopagus — a hill with an outcrop of rock on top — where the philosophers went every day to engage one another in conversation and where many others came to listen, learn and be amused. You can see it and walk on it today. It's not far from the excavated old city center and market place. Standing on the Areopagus you can imagine the Athenians shopping at the stalls, getting a drink, meeting friends, and walking up the hill to hear what was new and interesting for the day.

When he came to Athens, Paul was taken to the Areopagus, given a hearing. In fact, the intellectually-curious had heard about his rhetorical power and persuasiveness and wanted to engage him in dialogue.

What he said is very different from the other instances when the New Testament describes the content and method of his public speaking. In fact, it appears that Paul knew enough about his hearers, the philosophers from the Epicurean and Stoic schools, to borrow their methods of public discourse and to quote one of their poets.

He acknowledges their interest in religion, makes common cause with their quest for authentic religion, compliments them on their approach and even an altar he has seen to "the unknown God."

God — they already agree — is known in the creation, in nature; God the maker of all things, the "first cause." And as they nodded in approval, Paul made his move. This God we all know is out there somewhere; this God in whom we all "live and move and have our being," this God raised his appointed man from the dead. There was a thunderous silence. "Did he really say what I think he said?" they must have remarked. "Did he actually leap from the lovely abstractions we so enjoy discussing: to God in the loveliness of nature; God in sky and sea and sun; from that to something so particular, so earthy, so mundane as a dead man? And did he actually say something about resurrection?"

They scoffed, Luke reports. Some showed a little interest, but not many, and Paul left. It's the only place he ever preached without stirring up some kind of resistance and persecution. And perhaps that's what happens to Christian faith in the big city. It gets pushed aside, marginalized, by a sophisticated intellectualism that enjoys the rigor of a good argument but is not willing to be committed, to believe and trust and live and die for faith; or it is simply overwhelmed by the sheer size and muscularity and magnitude of the institutions around it.

Is there the suggestion of a strategy that emerges from Paul's visit to the city of Athens?

I believe there is, and I think it begins with the way he identified with the city's intellectual and spiritual quest. I think our strategy must be to embrace the city: to affirm and celebrate what is good and creative and hopeful about the city. The church hasn't always done that, by the way. The church has sometimes spoken and acted in a way that confirms the old stereotype of the city as a dangerous, morally evil place, full of sin and vice. Professor Gaylord Noyce of Yale writes about the city:

"There is good within secular culture, its science and humanistic learning, its economics, athletics, and sheer gregariousness." [p. 135]

This city is a sheer wonder. Those of us who live in it know that it is impossible to be weary or bored by it: the wonderful diversity of its people; a racial, ethnic kaleidoscope replete with customs, languages, costumes, skin colors, music, and food which we city people alone are privileged to experience. And its art and music — the best in the world, its universities and hospitals, its athletics and its almost perverse pride in loving teams that lose more than they should.

This city is a sheer wonder and part of being the church here is to say that something of the diversity and creativity and energy of the city is at least a partial reflection of what God intends for the human community.

Beyond affirming what is good, and identifying with the spiritual longing of the city, the church meets some very real needs.

The University of Chicago's Jean Bethke Elshtain has written an important new book, *Democracy on Trial.* She also studies communities and institutions and she says flatly that the simple existence of a church enhances the quality of life in a neighborhood and improves even the crime rate.

Churches provide community. Churches are places where busy people are together; places where life is lived a little more kindly and gently.

Churches serve the city. First, by their presence, reminding the whole community of mutual responsibility to serve and care for the neediest. Religion is where the very notion of community service, of volunteering time and energy, of giving money for the edification and assistance of others, originated.

Second, churches serve the community by promoting direct help to the needy.

We teach and tutor children.
We stand with their families.
We administer flu shots.
We receive the anxious, afraid and addicted.
We feed, clothe and house the homeless ... a number of
very needy men and women for whom we are the only
contact with caring human beings.
We support and stand with our older and wiser ones.

One day last week I attended three meetings, as the pastor of this church, representing its people and their commitments, and I think you should know about them.

The first meeting was Central City Housing Ventures, which brings together a dozen or so congregations and is close to launching an exciting new project, a $10 million Single-Room-Occupancy facility for 170 homeless people on the corner of Wabash and 18th, meeting one of our city's most urgent needs.

The second meeting was a tour of Deborah's Place, a wonderful newly-renovated shelter and SRO facility for homeless women, started, organized, and sustained mainly by churches, including this one, and church people.

The third event was an inspection of the new Fourth Presbyterian Church Children's Center, our new Day Care Center for people who work and live in the center city.

Those are basic, necessary services and facilities that government can't always provide and individuals can't always afford and churches, here — everywhere — quietly and faithfully perform and provide.

Being a church in the city means joining the quest for truth, embracing this city, and serving its needy. If this congregation has learned anything about our life that might be useful to ourselves and others it is that there is something about the mission, about the intentional outreach, the consistent asking after the community's needs over the years and decades that authenticates and celebrates and communicates the message, the Gospel of Jesus Christ tself.

The marginalization of religion that Harvey Cox and others observe in life in general happens in your life and mine, in particular. We can squeeze it into the corner, keep our faith closeted from the rest of life, keep it pure and untainted by politics, economics, our personal code of responsibility and accountability. The Athenians did it intellectually, played with the ideas of faith and faithfulness, but couldn't deal with the particulars of a God who was an active presence in life, who was sovereign over all of life — even the intellectual dimension of humanness — even human death.

The Athenians asked the right questions, were on the right track with their open pursuit of truth, their "altar to the unknown God." But they couldn't get their minds around the incarnation, the actual involvement of God in the daily life of creation, their daily lives. Their God was an abstraction, a logical philosophic thesis. Paul was talking about a God who loves, cares passionately, suffers and dies; a God whose love is ultimate truth, a love sovereign even over death.

There's a wonderful image the Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, invoked and taught. He called it the "leap of faith." Reason, intellectual inquiry, academic dialogue — honorable exercises, all of them — can take us only so far, he taught. Having thought and analyzed and discussed and argued all we can, we either pull back, marginalize the whole business, keep it closeted from the rest of our life, particularly the intellectual part or, with everything in us — our heart and soul as well as our mind — make a decision to be something. It's a leap into the abyss, a leap of faith, a trusting, loving, commitment to the God who is Lord of all and who raised Jesus from the dead.

The Athenians didn't get it, didn't do it and missed the adventure of authentic faith.

There is something of that in being an urban church, sitting in a building 200 years out of date, growing smaller in relation to the buildings around us by the decade, yet bravely proclaiming the presence of one who is sovereign over all, in this place where human achievement is on display adjacent to human failure and despair, precisely here, advocating for hope and kindness, praying and working for a world of peace and justice — the City of God — right here on a corner in the City of Chicago.

There is always something of that in being a Christian; here or anywhere. The leap of faith to believe in God. The leap of commitment to follow Jesus. The leap of trust in the one who raised him from the dead; the one who calls us to live fully and responsibly and faithfully: the leap of trust in one whose love embraces this and every city, and in which you and I live and move and have our being. Thanks to be to God.